



What Is the Code of Ethics?

King County believes that public confidence in government is essential. The Code of Ethics is a county law that supports this policy by setting standards to make sure all of our transactions and decisions are fair and honest.

What Does the Code Do?

When its provisions are followed, the code ensures that the personal and financial interests of employees and elected officials do not present a real or apparent conflict of interest in our responsibilities to serve the public.

Who Is Subject to the Code?

All county employees—including elected officials and citizens who serve as members of county boards, commissions or other multimember bodies—are subject to the code. It does not affect employees of the county's judicial branch, but does affect employees of the department of judicial administration.

The Purpose of This Summary

Since all of us must follow the provisions of the Code of Ethics, we are providing you with a summary of the law in plain language. We have highlighted important code provisions and given examples of situations you may encounter while working at the county to help you make ethical decisions.



Just and Equitable Treatment

(K.C.C. 3.04.020)

Use of County Property

Your use of county property is limited to the conduct of official business and uses that are available to the general public. County property includes vehicles, facilities (buildings, conference rooms, etc.), equipment (computers, telephones, cell phones, copy and fax machines, etc.), and supplies.

For example, if you work at home using your office laptop computer, it is inappropriate to use the computer for personal business, even infrequently; using government resources for personal convenience or profit is a misuse of taxpayer dollars and a violation of the code.

Preferential Treatment and Use of Official Position

You have an obligation to treat all citizens equitably and fairly. You may not grant any special consideration, treatment, or advantage beyond that which is available to every other citizen, and using your official position to obtain special favors for friends, relatives, business associates, or yourself is prohibited.

Political Activities

You are encouraged to participate in the political process on your own time and outside of the workplace, but you may not use county facilities for such purposes. You may not use county property, including phones, e-mail, or copy machines, on behalf of political candidates or ballot issues, even during your lunch hour.



Avoiding Conflicts of Interest

(K.C.C. 3.04.030)

Business Relationships

A conflict of interest occurs when you have a personal or financial interest in any matter in which you participate or have job responsibilities as a county employee. These interests could influence, or appear to influence, your professional judgment and affect your official decision-making. Conflict of interest includes:

- Seeking or receiving economic gain for personal or family use through access to privileged information or official position.

For example, if you are working on the specifications of a county contract that requires construction services and your brother owns a construction company, you are prohibited from telling your brother the details of the specifications before they become public.

- Possessing a financial interest in a firm or organization that does business or seeks to do business with the county and not disclosing that interest.

For example, if you are seeking a land development consultant for a county project and you are a part owner in a development business, you must disclose this fact.

- Participating in or seeking to influence the selection of persons, firms, or organizations doing business with the county when having a financial interest in the outcome.

For example, if your spouse is the director of a non-profit organization competing for a contract with your county agency and you have any job responsibilities related to the contract, you must disclose this fact.



Outside Employment

As a county employee, it is a conflict of interest for you to enter into a business relationship outside county government with any employee for whom you have supervisory responsibility. It is also a conflict to enter into a business relationship with someone you deal with in an official capacity as a county employee. Other conflicts that could arise from outside employment:

- Discussing an offer of future employment with anyone doing business or seeking to do business with the county if you have reason to suspect that the offer is intended in any way as compensation or reward for the performance or non-performance of your duties as a county employee.
- Discussing an offer of future employment with a person doing business or seeking to do business with the county if you have job responsibilities related to that person, unless you have first disclosed in writing to your appointing authority that you intend to discuss future employment with that person, and your appointing authority has designated in a memorandum filed with the Board of Ethics a method of providing for an alternate decision-maker in matters involving that person.
- Awarding a county contract or participating in an action that benefits a former employer within one year of beginning employment with the county.
- Failing to disclose your status as an employee, agent, officer, partner, director, or consultant of any person doing business or seeking to do business with the county in matters in which you participate or have any job responsibilities.
- Accepting compensation or engaging in any type of employment or service that is incompatible with the official and proper discharge of your county duties, or in any action that could impair your independent judgment in an official capacity.



Acceptance of Gifts

Accepting anything of value, either directly or indirectly, from any person, business, group, or organization that does business or seeks to do business with the county in an area where you have responsibility, or when such acceptance could reasonably be considered to impair your professional and independent judgment, is prohibited.

For example, if you're a manager who administers contracts within your department and a vendor sends you a gift basket in appreciation for the county's business during the year, it is inappropriate to accept the gift.

Even if you are not in a position to influence the selection of vendors for the department, you may not accept gifts from contractors. For example, if a vendor who supplies your agency comes into your office and gives you a desk clock, acceptance is inappropriate. Despite the fact that you make no contract or purchasing decisions, the clock is a gift and could make other vendors feel obligated to provide similar gifts. In addition, displaying any items with vendor logos might also imply county endorsement.

Exceptions are made for informational, but not promotional, materials, and for ceremonial gifts valued under \$20 on special occasions.

If you receive a gift, return it to the donor within 30 days of receipt or give it to a charitable organization. If you donate it to charity, you may not take a tax deduction for the donation.



Meals and Refreshments

Although it is a common business practice to take clients to lunch or dinner, or to allow them to take you, this is not acceptable for public employees. If you are invited to lunch by someone who does business or seeks to do business with the county in a matter for which you have responsibility or may participate, pay for your own meal.

If you are invited to a reception, open house, or similar event by vendors, consultants, or others who do business or seek to do business with the county, either decline the invitation or pay market value for the cost of refreshments to avoid any perception of undue influence or conflict of interest. However, you may accept light refreshments, such as beverages and doughnuts or cookies, without payment if offered during the conduct of official business. For example, if a contractor invites your department to a reception to celebrate the completion of a project, pay for your refreshments. However, if you are attending a planning meeting to discuss a revised timetable for a project, no payment for light refreshments is required.

Post-Employment Restrictions

(K.C.C. 3.04.035)

For one year after you leave county employment, you may not have a financial or beneficial interest in a contract or grant that was planned, authorized, or funded by a county action you participated in during your employment; or work as a contractor or subcontractor, whether or not for compensation, in any county action you participated in during your employment.

For example, if you leave county employment to work for a consultant that has a contract with the county, and you had job responsibilities related to that contract as a county employee, you must wait one year before working on that same contract.



Additionally, after you leave county employment you may not disclose or use any privileged or proprietary information gained by reason of your former employment for your personal benefit or the personal benefit of a member of your immediate family unless the information is a matter of public knowledge or is available to the public on request. You may not assist any person, whether or not for compensation, on matters in which you are personally prohibited from participating.

You may accept future employment with the county at any time, including employment with your former department, or appear before the county or seek a county action on your own behalf to the same extent other persons may appear before or seek actions by the county. However, for one year after leaving county employment, you must disclose in writing your past county employment before participating in any county action.

Members of County Boards, Commissions, Committees, and Multimember Bodies

If you're a member of a county board, commission, committee, or other multimember body, you are considered a county employee and all Code of Ethics provisions apply while you're engaged in service on behalf of the county. Additionally, for one year after leaving county service, you are prohibited from appearing before the board or commission on which you served or from receiving compensation for services to any business or person in any action in which you participated while serving on the board or commission.

For example, if you helped write the specifications for a county grant as a board member, you may not apply for that grant for one year after leaving the board. This restriction also applies to partners or associates of businesses or persons in which you have a financial interest. For example, if you had any participation or responsibilities in a county contract as a board member, no one from the company you work for may vie for that contract for one year.



Disclosure of Interests by Employees

(K.C.C. 3.04.050)

Employees , Elected Officials, and Candidates

If you are an elected county official, an employee appointed by the county executive, an employee appointed by the county administrative officer or department director and subject to the approval of the county executive, an employee of the council, or an employee specifically identified by the Board of Ethics, you must file a statement of financial and other interests within ten days of employment or appointment and on or before April 15th of each year. In addition, if you're a candidate for county elective office, a nominee for appointment to any county elective office (except judicial), or a nominee for appointment to a county board or commission, you must file a disclosure statement within two weeks of nomination or appointment.

To find out if you must file due to your position with the county, consult your supervisor. The office of the Board of Ethics can provide you with a current list of criteria of who must file and filing procedures. For a copy of the disclosure statement or a guide to financial disclosure, visit the Board of Ethics Web site or contact the Ethics office.

Disclosure of Interests by Consultants

(K.C.C. 3.04.120)

Consultants and Vendors

If you are a consultant entering into a contract with the county to provide professional or technical services to the county costing over \$2,500, you must file a consultant disclosure form with the Board of Ethics. No payment may be made on your contract until five days after receipt of the completed form. For a copy of the disclosure form or a guide to consultant disclosure, visit the Board of Ethics Web site or contact the Ethics office.



What Do I Do If I Have a Potential Conflict?

(K.C.C. 3.04.037)

First, you must notify your supervisor in writing of the potential conflict. Then he or she must help you to resolve the issue and keep a written record of the disposition of the issue. You or your supervisor may also call the Ethics office for information on relevant provisions in the code and for past advisory opinions on similar situations.

Code of Ethics Complaints, Violations and Penalties

(K.C.C. 3.04.055 and K.C.C. 3.04.060)

While the Board of Ethics issues advisory opinions which interpret the code, the ombudsman investigates complaints that allege violations of the code. Based on the results of an investigation, the ombudsman may find that there either is or is not reasonable cause to support a finding of violation. If the ombudsman finds reasonable cause to support an allegation of the violation, an order to this effect is issued to the respondent. The respondent may appeal the ombudsman's decision to the Board of Ethics. All respondents have certain procedural rights during both the complaint and appeals process. For more information on these rights, go to the Board of Ethics Web site, or contact the Ethics office or the Office of Citizen Complaints.

The Code of Ethics includes provisions for criminal and civil penalties and disciplinary action for violations of the code. Civil penalties include a monetary amount not to exceed the lesser of one month's county pay or the amount authorized by law. In addition, if you are found in violation of the code, you may be subject to disciplinary action up to and including termination from employment. Such disciplinary action would be taken consistent with Career Service guidelines and your collective bargaining agreement (if any).



How Does the Board of Ethics Serve Me?

Mission of the Board of Ethics

The mission of the Board of Ethics is to ensure the highest standards of public service by developing, disseminating, and promoting readily understandable ethics requirements for King County employees and agencies.

Advisory Opinions

If you are unsure whether an action or interest violates the code, you may request an advisory opinion directly from the Board of Ethics. Advisory opinions are intended to provide guidance and prevent future actions that may violate the code. Requests for advisory opinions must be submitted in writing to the Board of Ethics or its administrator. The board meets once a month, normally on the third Monday, to consider requests for advisory opinions and related issues. All meetings are open to the public and those requesting opinions are especially encouraged to attend. Visit the Board of Ethics Web site or contact the Ethics office for the full text of all advisory opinions.

Ethics Help Line and Staff Informational Responses

If you have a question you believe is related to the Code of Ethics, the Ethics staff is available to help you make ethical decisions. Call the Ethics Help Line at 206-296-1586. We are also happy to respond to your inquiry in writing with a staff informational response, providing guidance through Ethics Code references and existing advisory opinions.

Training and Education

The Ethics staff conducts weekly education sessions for new county employees, an in-depth seminar for supervisors, and on-site meetings with employees to address department-specific concerns. If you or your agency



would like to discuss issues related to the Code of Ethics, contact your supervisor or the Ethics office to arrange for a meeting.

Office of Citizen Complaints

The Office of Citizen Complaints, or ombudsman, is responsible for resolving citizen complaints concerning Metropolitan King County policies, procedures, and practices. The ombudsman's powers and scope of authority are covered in Chapters 2.52, 3.04, and 3.42 of the King County Code.

The ombudsman encourages citizens and employees to initially direct concerns to the agencies with which they may have a problem, allowing the agency the opportunity to answer questions and resolve the issue. However, if an agency is unable to assist you, or if you feel you have been unfairly treated, you may file a complaint with the ombudsman.

The ombudsman is authorized to investigate acts that are:

- Contrary to laws and ordinances
- Unreasonable, unfair, oppressive, or inconsistent with normal agency functions
- Improper or inefficiently performed
- Unclear or inadequately explained

The ombudsman may decide not to act on a complaint if there is reason to believe that:

- Other remedies or avenues for the complaint are available but have not been pursued
- The complaint concerns an issue beyond the authority of the ombudsman



- The complaint is trivial, frivolous, or not made in good faith
- The complaint has been too long delayed to justify examination of the relevant facts

If the ombudsman considers a complaint appropriate for investigation, the Office of Citizen Complaints will research the complaint and advise the complainant of its findings and of any actions taken. Contact the office by calling 206-296-3452.